

VU Research Portal

South Africa and the decolonization of the mind

Ellis, S.

2009

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Ellis, S. (2009). *South Africa and the decolonization of the mind*. VU University.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF THE MIND

Mijnheer de Rector, dames en heren:

It is an honour to be appointed to a chair bearing the name of Desmond Tutu.

Archbishop Tutu received his Nobel prize in 1984, but he is probably most famous for his later chairmanship of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This body was established shortly after what was, by common consent, the most dangerous period in South Africa's recent history. I am referring to the four years between the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other anti-apartheid organizations in 1990 and South Africa's first democratic election in 1994.

Thousands of people lost their lives in that span of time as a result of violence that was more or less closely connected to the formal political process that led to a successful transfer of state power from the National Party to the ANC.

I can recall a conversation I had with a leading Western ambassador in South Africa in 1990. Describing South Africa's transition, the ambassador told me it was Africa's last chance to join the real world. Being an academic, and therefore pedantic, I cannot fully approve this formulation, since the world is what it is, and not what any one of us thinks it ought to be. No country can ever join or leave the world, but can only conform to or differ from an ideological representation of it. Still, I think I understand what the ambassador meant. He was referring to a perception that the countries south of the Sahara, over the decades since most of them acquired sovereign status in the 1950s and 1960s, have generally failed to find political stability or to fulfil their economic potential. They have become a permanent concern of the international community, which, collectively and via bilateral relations, provides them with development aid. South Africa, the ambassador was implying, has the means to lead the rest of sub-Saharan Africa out of the hole into which it has fallen.

We are now nineteen years further on from that conversation, and fifteen years from the inauguration of the first ANC government in South Africa. No serious observer has any doubt that the country has seen specific improvements since 1994, too numerous for me to list here. Yet South Africa has not lived up to all the hopes raised when it endowed itself for the first time with a government elected by the whole adult population. The country's high levels of poverty and its growing inequality have been a matter of comment for some years. Moreover, it remains a violent society. Last year, anti-foreigner attacks did considerable damage to South Africa's image worldwide. In fact, one-third of the 62 people killed as a result of these violent assaults¹ were not foreigners at all, but South Africans generally from rural areas, in many cases killed because they were not perceived as having full rights of residence in urban settlements where competition for houses and space is intense. That brutal outburst confirmed what has been evident for some time, namely that South Africa is not the rainbow nation that Desmond Tutu prayed for. In effect, many South Africans do not perceive citizenship as homogeneous, but as a series of layers, like the skins of an onion.² Some citizens are believed to be at the inner core, with real rights, while others are deemed to have lesser rights, because of their geographical or ethnic origin. Poor immigrants from the rest of Africa have the fewest rights of all.

Conflicts fuelled by differing perceptions of citizenship are only one issue requiring reconciliation, the process of persuading the people who live in South Africa to exist in peace, accepting the realities of their past and the responsibilities that flow from such acceptance. Here we encounter another aspect of the vision dear to Desmond Tutu: the idea that South Africa's long season of violence would pass with the election of a democratic government and the promulgation of a non-racial constitution. This, too, is open to question. The hope that a formal political agreement between all the main political parties would end South Africa's violence was often based on a misidentification of the nature of that violence. In the last years of apartheid, strategic thinkers from both the state security forces and the anti-apartheid camp broadly agreed that their country was at war. From the mid-1970s, the South African Defence Force was conducting a conventional military campaign in

¹ BBC News, 'South Africa appeal on xenophobia', 11 May 2009: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8044186.stm> [accessed 11 May 2009].

² Shireen Hassim, Tawana Kupe and Eric Worby (eds), *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, xenophobia and the reinvention of difference in South Africa* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008), p.16.

Angola and launched commando raids on some other countries. Within South Africa itself, the war was never of a conventional type. Much of the violence that occurred there was socially rooted, shaped by the country's history of conquest and segregation. Both the ANC and other insurrectionary organizations and the state's counter-insurgency forces aimed to use this socially-grounded violence for their own purposes. As a leading military strategist wrote in a manual adopted by the state security forces at the height of repression in the 1980s, 'the objective for both sides in a revolutionary war is the population itself'.³ Accordingly, it was the population at large that bore the brunt of the violence.

South Africa's transformation

Appreciating the degree to which the war for South Africa was rooted in society throws some light on subsequent violence. According to the most recent available statistics, 18,487 murders were reported to the South African Police Service⁴ in the twelve months to March 2008, not to mention other types of serious violence. The number of murders before 1994 was often lower than this.⁵ In other words, more people may be being murdered in South Africa at a time of peace than when the struggle for liberation was at its height.

South Africa is no longer involved in a conventional war or even a guerrilla war, but it is, as one recent author put it, a country at war with itself.⁶ This expression reflects a paradox that was already apparent to observers of Archbishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as it struggled to disentangle political from non-political motivations in the violence perpetrated by individuals. The apartheid years had thrown up such grotesque cases as that of Barend Strydom, the self-proclaimed *wit wolf*,⁷ a white supremacist who shot seven black people dead in a random attack in 1988. These murders were carried out as expressions of a racist ideology that had

³ Brigadier C.A. Fraser, 'Lessons learnt from past revolutionary wars', p.5, unpublished text circulated among senior officers of the South African Defence Force. Copy in the author's possession.

⁴ Official South African police statistics reported at http://www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2008/crime_stats_2008.htm [accessed 26 March 2009].

⁵ The pre-1994 statistics are notoriously unreliable. Mark Shaw, *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transforming under fire* (C. Hurst & Co., London, 2002), pp.15-17.

⁶ Antony Albeker, *A Country at War with Itself: South Africa's crisis of crime* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2007).

⁷ His own memoir is *Barend Strydom Die Wit Wolf: 'n belydenis* (Vaandel Uitgevers, Mosselbaai, 1997).

been personally embraced, and not at the behest of any organization. Nevertheless, Strydom was eventually released from prison. Four young Africanist militants who, five years later, killed an American anti-apartheid activist, Amy Biehl, in the mistaken belief that she was a white South African, were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the grounds that they had been incited by militant political speeches.⁸ These are extreme cases, but it was in mobilizing emotions and inciting people to violence that both the struggle to overthrow apartheid and the counter-insurgency campaign deployed by the apartheid state took shape. Political and military strategists aimed to subsume conflicts that were socially generated into grand narratives of the state and the nation. Actions that in other circumstances might have been interpreted as non-political thereby became politicized. A murder or a car-hijacking could become a political act. The installation of a democratic government in 1994 removed the legitimacy previously accorded to many acts in contravention of the law that had earlier been hailed as political, but without redressing the social processes from which they had sprung.

To place the relation between politics and crime in proper context it should be appreciated that the system of government that existed in South Africa before 1994 was based not only on the control of the state apparatus by a particular political party, but on a social order in which each person was designated by law as belonging to an ethnically defined population group. Each group was deemed to have its proper place. Various types of social or even personal relationship thereby acquired a political complexion. One of the great achievements of opposition political activists in the 1980s was to persuade a broad swath of the South African public, not to mention world opinion, that the system of apartheid underlay all social tensions. It might have been more accurate to express matters another way, however, by noting that social tensions arising from a difficult past underlay successive forms of oppression, of which apartheid was the most recent and most pervasive. In various parts of South Africa, Dutch and British colonial regimes and a self-governing dominion had already enacted laws that effectively took land away from the country's earlier inhabitants. The formation of labour markets and hierarchies of authority generated further conflicts. South Africa had already been a self-governing country,

⁸ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (5 vols., Cape Town, 1998), 3, p.511.

under white minority rule, for over three decades before the National Party came to power in 1948 and proceeded to implement the policy it called apartheid.

The long negotiations leading to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 changed the relationship between the social and political spheres. Yet, the formal change of political authority that abolished apartheid did not itself bring about the deeper transformation of society to which many South Africans aspire. Eighteen thousand, four hundred and eighty-seven lives lost in just one year⁹ are an indication that violent struggles continue, now in a form divorced from any conventional definition of politics. Some murders are so banal, such as when people are killed for their mobile phones, that they cannot be dignified with the description of a political act. The fact that they are accompanied by other forms of violence, domestic and sexual, strengthens the impression that violence constitutes a complex social fact that cannot convincingly be viewed as a crude form of class struggle.¹⁰ In this sense, South Africa's political transformation—here meaning the transfer of political control over the state—is one component of a more diffuse set of struggles, social in nature.

This situation is not, in principle, unusual. All societies have their share of conflict, major and minor. Appeals for the state to implement a complete social transformation must therefore be regarded with some scepticism, as such a project can never lead to a final stage of total harmony, but only to new forms of struggle. As Archbishop Tutu recognized long ago, what is most important for South Africa is to achieve a degree of equilibrium through mutual acceptance by people who are destined to live with each other. But as Archbishop Tutu has also pointed out, reconciliation means more than saying sorry for past wrongs. It implies restitution. The ideological and even spiritual aspects of reconciliation cannot be divorced from its material aspects. The fact that white South Africans continue on average to enjoy a higher standard of living than their black compatriots therefore constitutes a continuing reminder of the legacies of past injustices and of the limits of reconciliation.

The notion that South Africa's transformation remains incomplete is held by people at different points of the ideological spectrum. For the South African Communist Party, now more influential than at any time since 1990, the country's first democratic

⁹ See note 4.

¹⁰ Altbeker, *A Country at War*.

election was the expression of a national revolution that still has to be superseded by a second phase that communists believe to be inevitable, namely a socialist revolution. Many white South Africans and quite a few of the 'coloured' population, meanwhile, perceive that policies of black empowerment are depriving them of the equal political rights that are guaranteed by the constitution. From both these points of view, the political transformation that occurred in 1994 has not been pursued to its logical conclusion. This is hardly surprising inasmuch as the settlement of 1994 and the constitution entrenching it were based on a compromise, and compromises require people to renounce pursuit of their interests or convictions to the bitter end.

The African context

Let me now return to the ambassador who told me in 1990 that the South African transition was Africa's last chance to join the real world. He was alluding to a longer phase of African history, from the late 1940s onwards, encompassing the period of decolonization and subsequent attempts to mould disparate political communities into nations while building efficient public bureaucracies that could play a role in the mass reshaping of society.

South Africa does not fit easily into a pan-African chronology that is determined by reference to the period of formal colonial rule. The colonization of South Africa began rather early, when the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) established a supply station in Table Bay in 1652, that grew into today's Cape Town. Legally speaking, South Africa ceased to be a colony in 1910. Still, it is not hard to understand why the South African Communist Party and the ANC invented the expression Colonialism of a Special Type to designate the South African condition under apartheid, referring to a situation in which a sovereign state was ruled by a local political party, but one that represented a particular section of the country's population only, defined by skin colour.

If we are better to understand some common elements that link South Africa to the rest of the African continent, it is useful to approach the issue not in constitutional terms, noting when a certain territory became a European colony and when it acquired international recognition of its sovereignty, but in terms of a longer history of the

insertion of the whole continent of Africa into global relations of diplomacy, trade and production. An early form of globalization came into existence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when European traders used South American silver to finance their expeditions to Asia, transporting slaves from Africa to America to work in their mines and plantations. This was the context in which the original VOC station at Cape Town was established.

As Europeans came to exert control over increasingly large parts of the globe, they developed a particular view of their own place in history. Many Europeans, and Americans too, came to believe themselves to be the possessors of the most advanced institutions and systems of government the world has ever seen. They have often thought these systems so good that they should in principle be applied everywhere. Reasoning along lines dictated by a particular concept of progress, it was common until quite recently, and among the European and American general publics perhaps even now, to suppose that Africans are living not just in another continent, but in another phase of historical time, one that Europe and America have long outgrown.

It was at the peak of the Atlantic slave trade, in the late eighteenth century, that the anti-slave trade movement was established in Great Britain. In one of the first campaigns to mobilize public opinion in something like our modern sense, the anti-slave trade activists, many of them with roots in the evangelical revival of their age, persuaded the British parliament to abolish the slave trade in 1807.¹¹ Anti-slave trade and anti-slavery movements arose in other European countries also.

The association of Africa with the Atlantic slave trade and the abolition thereof marked the emergence among a significant number of people in northern Europe especially of a conviction that they had a moral duty to lift Africa, the victim of the slave trade, to a higher condition. At that time, this was generally expressed as a mission to bring 'civilization' to Africa.¹² This term was used by nineteenth-century Europeans to designate a transfer of European technical expertise and, usually, Christian religion. Together, it was believed, these could transform whole populations and bring them into the world of capitalist trade and, eventually, within

¹¹ Among a spate of recent work occasioned by the bicentenary of abolition, see e.g. Adam Hochschild, *Burying the Chains: The British struggle to abolish slavery* (Macmillan, London, 2005).

¹² E.g. William Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, 2 vols. (Fisher, Son, & Co., London and Paris), I, p.82.

the international concert of states. Missionary societies were founded in many European countries with a view to converting Africans and bringing them into a more advanced phase of history. Africa has occupied a particular role in the Western moral imagination ever since. Britain's prime minister Tony Blair, for example, famously referred to Africa as 'a scar on the conscience of the world'.¹³

It was after 1945 that this longstanding moral commitment to Africa acquired the form of a technocratic concept of 'development' that is familiar to us today. The United States' president Harry Truman, articulating a strategy of global economic expansion that was intended both to outflank Communism and to avoid a post-war economic depression, declared in his inaugural address on 20 January 1949: 'we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'.¹⁴ Twinned with an ideology of political emancipation, this policy of global development was profoundly unsettling to European colonial empires. The Soviet Union enthusiastically endorsed the same principle of global political and economic upliftment as long as its own official myth—to the effect that it was a union of emancipated peoples rather than a Russian empire—was not questioned. In time, the Soviet government came to consider hegemony over the third world as the key to a global victory in the cold war.¹⁵

In brief, this was the international environment in which African development in its contemporary sense was born and in which colonial territories in Africa acquired sovereign status. In most African countries, development came to mean legislating sovereign states into existence and equipping them with the bureaucratic apparatus regarded by the international community as standard and with a supply of capital necessary to raise growth rates and to pay for essential nation-building projects. In South Africa, it was clear that this process posed an implicit threat to white rule, and from the 1950s onwards, South Africa's apartheid government generally tried to convey the impression that the country was part of Africa in a geographical sense

¹³ Tom Porteous, *Britain in Africa* (Zed Books and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, London, New York and Pietermaritzburg, 2008), p.42.

¹⁴ The text of the speech is available at <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres53.html> [accessed 23 February 2008].

¹⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the world* (Allen Lane, London, 2005), ch.23, esp. pp.480-1.

only. In most other respects, the National Party government portrayed itself as a distant outpost of the North Atlantic world and therefore a natural ally of the West in the cold war. Any suggestion that South Africa could be lumped with the rest of Africa, such as was made by British prime minister Harold Macmillan in his famous speech to the all-white parliament in Cape Town in 1960, warning that a ‘wind of change’ was blowing through the continent,¹⁶ was not welcomed by supporters of apartheid. One strand of the South African government’s reaction to the new discourse of African freedom and development was to articulate the policy known as ‘separate development’ in regard to those of its own rural areas that it deemed to be Bantu homelands, mimicking within its own sphere the policy of world powers in regard to Africa as a whole.

In political language, the historical rearrangement of Africa’s political structures and legal status after 1945 is often subsumed under the terms ‘decolonization’ and ‘liberation’. It is a process that is generally considered to have come to a formal conclusion, or at least the end of a major phase, with South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994. All over Africa, the development that was explicitly bound to projects of national liberation meant obliging communities that were overwhelmingly agrarian to make more systematic use of money and exhorting them to become more productive. Systematic attempts were also made to encourage individualism and literacy, using techniques of social engineering¹⁷ based on prevailing theories in sociology, political science and development economics. These measures were applied in a continent that had in most places been quite thinly populated throughout its history, and only modestly productive in economic terms. Most African societies had been governed throughout their existence without reference to political entities that we would today recognize as states, and indeed without the use of writing. In fact, according to the historian John Lonsdale, ‘[t]he most distinctively African contribution to human history could be said to have been precisely the civilized art of living fairly peaceably together *not* in states’.¹⁸

¹⁶ Frank Myers, ‘Harold Macmillan’s “winds of change” speech: a case study in the rhetoric of policy change’, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 3, 4 (2000), pp.555-75. Although the speech has gone down in history as the ‘winds of change’, Macmillan in fact referred only to ‘wind’ in the singular.

¹⁷ A phrase apparently invented by Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957; Routledge, London and New York, 2002), pp.38-9.

¹⁸ John Lonsdale, ‘States and social processes in Africa: a historiographical survey’, *African Studies Review*, 24, 2-3 (1981), p.139.

Africa's experience of development bears comparison with the histories of many other parts of the world in the twentieth century. What they have in common are attempts to improve society by the bureaucratic application of policies based on ideologies, theories and techniques conceived in the mode of social science. The American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has also served as his country's national security advisor, uses the term 'coercive utopias' to designate these schemes based on purportedly scientific principles to improve the human condition. The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented toll of lives 'deliberately extinguished through politically motivated carnage', as he puts it,¹⁹ connected to attempts to create coercive utopias. The sociologist Manuel Castells makes a similar point when he warns us that 'to put it bluntly, all Utopias lead to Terror if there is a serious attempt at implementing them'.²⁰ The great irony is that these same coercive utopias have resulted in a huge increase in the number of human beings on the planet, and in the ability of a significant minority among them to enjoy unprecedented wealth and comfort.

In short, the development attempted in Africa from the mid-twentieth century onwards may be described as a coercive utopia. Development in Africa has brought such benefits as increasing the numbers of children in school. By improving health care, development policies have been closely associated with the massive increase in population that Africa has witnessed over the last six or seven decades 'of a scale and speed unique in human history', in the opinion of one leading historian.²¹ On the other hand, the failure to achieve some of the goals of the hugely ambitious policies of social engineering implemented in Africa in the name of liberation and development since 1945 has led to the implosion of some states amid widespread social upheaval. (It should be said in passing that this is not true of the whole of Africa, and nor is it true of Africa alone, as the same has occurred in some other parts of the world).

Coming to terms with history

¹⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global turmoil on the eve of the twenty-first century* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1993), p.17.

²⁰ Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium* (1998; Second edn., Blackwell, Malden MA etc., 2000), p.63.

²¹ John Iliffe, *Africans: The history of a continent* (2nd edn., Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.2.

For African nationalists, South Africa's democratic election of 1994 was a milestone in the liberation of their continent. The way was now clear for Africa to rediscover its true identity. Peace, they believed, could come to societies that had been fundamentally destabilized by the colonial experience or its cousin, apartheid. Thabo Mbeki, already in effect South Africa's premier and shortly to become its president, began to speak of an African renaissance. He was expressing the idea that a continent that had once been colonized and humiliated was now ready to face the problems of its time by drawing on its own traditions, in full self-confidence, no longer overshadowed by foreigners. The South African poet Breyten Breytenbach, no admirer of the current ANC government, expresses this aspiration as 'an African modernity nourished from African roots and realities'.²²

But the late 1990s did not witness an African renaissance in this sense. One of the great hopes of the African renaissance was that the fall in 1997 of the notorious dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo would liberate the continent's heartland. In fact, Mobutu's enforced departure turned into a period of war and misery in central Africa that has cost more lives than any international conflict since the Second World War. Not even South Africa has found true peace and reconciliation, but has become a society at war with itself, as we have mentioned.

If we are to wonder whether and how Africans, including those in its southernmost country, can regain the self-confidence necessary to face the future in the spirit of realism suggested by Breytenbach and others, we need to reconsider the role of the colonial period in Africa's longer history, as I have suggested. It is also necessary to situate the matter in a broader geographical context. This can usefully be done by referring to Asia. Perhaps the most common assertion made by commentators on world affairs today is that China has truly become a great power, with India close behind. It is also sometimes pointed out that this is not such a remarkable occurrence as may at first appear, as China and India are merely reoccupying something like the position they had relative to Europe before the nineteenth century, in terms of

²² Breyten Breytenbach, 'Mandela's smile: notes on South Africa's failed revolution', *Harpers Magazine* (December 2008): <http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk/article.asp?ID=9848> [accessed 28 May 2009].

economic performance, population size and other forms of measurement.²³ Not least, the rise of some Asian countries as major economic powers signifies the degree to which their intellectual, scientific and bureaucratic elites have mastered a corpus of technical knowledge that emerged to a large extent in the West. Yet Asian elites have generally continued to find a notable degree of inspiration in their own histories and philosophies. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty is one of many scholars to have argued that the West has too often believed that, during the period of its own extraordinary hegemony, Europeans were the only historical actors whose ideas and actions mattered in the sense of having lasting influence on the world. Chakrabarty's argument is not a nihilist statement to the effect that we should pay no heed to the writings of dead white men, as the cliché goes. Nor is it a crude assertion that Asia must remain true to something called Asian values (another cliché). On the contrary, he argues that the ideas of the great European thinkers have become the property of all mankind.²⁴

The proposition that key Asian countries have been able to pick up a historical thread by assuming responsibility for their past, including its colonial phase, may be extended to the world more generally. We have noted that colonial territories all over the world became sovereign states after 1945. This resulted in an increase in membership of the United Nations from 51 states at its inception to 192 today. In regard to Africa specifically, commentators and analysts advance various reasons why so many of these new states have failed to fulfil their potential, varying from neo-colonialism and the ruthless self-interest of great powers to home-grown errors and flaws and combinations of all of these.

In retrospect, we can see that when African countries acquired sovereignty, the new regimes, although now presided over by Africans rather than Europeans, continued to make abundant use of the practices, routines and mentalities of their colonial predecessors. These postcolonial states became a platform for a more ambitious form of political monopoly than anything European colonial officials had attempted. But

²³ Cf. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world Economy* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2000).

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2000), p.5.

this state of affairs proved to be of short duration.²⁵ Various crises of the 1970s and 1980s produced pressures, external and internal, for the economic and political reconfiguration of Africa's postcolonial states. Deprived of the superpower support they had enjoyed during the cold war, by the 1990s some of them had lost their state-like quality to the extent that talk emerged of 'collapsed' states²⁶ or 'failed' states, a phrase popularized by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright,²⁷ and today more generally known as 'fragile' states. All of these terms designate a renewal of informal politics as local societies adapt to the diminished presence of the bureaucratic state together with the services it can provide. The perceived fragility of many African states today is characteristic of a new historical phase superseding the two decades that might usefully be labelled as 'postcolonial'.

In some respects, then, Africa has been thoroughly decolonized. Formal sovereignty has been enhanced by a partial acquisition of financial power. Yet the most important sort of decolonization remains still to take place. This is the decolonization of the mind. Although this phrase is not mentioned by Chakrabarty, it could be used to describe the argument used by him and some other scholars.²⁸ The key to decolonizing the mind, I suggest, is for all concerned not to reject their past but to assume responsibility for it. It should be recognized that Africans were not entirely passive throughout the processes of colonization and deepening dependency, and that these were phases in a much longer history of insertion in global affairs that began long before colonial times. Furthermore, there is not, and never has been, an authentic Africa that is unchanged by time, outside history, waiting to reawake from long sleep. This is actually a myth of European Romanticism that has been taken over by African nationalists. Encouraging the belief in an authentic Africa that is a permanent victim of history makes it very hard to think of twenty-first century Africa other than as a place that is failing to develop, unless it is by arguing that the continent

²⁵ Crawford Young, 'The end of the post-colonial state in Africa? Reflections on changing African political dynamics', *African Affairs*, 103, 410 (2004), pp.23-49.

²⁶ I. William Zartman (ed), *Collapsed States: The disintegration and restoration of legitimate authority* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1995).

²⁷ She used this phrase at her first press conference after her appointment, on 24 January 1997: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/january97/albright_1-24.html [accessed 27 December 2008].

²⁸ Cf. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The politics of language in African literature* (James Currey, London, 1986). It is striking how often key insights into Africa's societies and politics have come from novelists sometimes decades before they have been identified by social scientists.

is poised to achieve a stunning breakthrough, as development experts often do in an effort to show that it is not their policy, but reality itself, that is defective.

By the same token, we Europeans must do something similar for ourselves. We too still live with a myth that was generated by the experience of world domination, namely that every society must sooner or later follow the Western path of development if it is truly to reach the modern age. The rise of Asia, including by its acceptance of intellectual cosmopolitanism, implies that ideas of Asian and African provenance not only have their own validity, but also have the potential to become relevant to Europe.

I may go to the heart of the matter by quoting Martin Luther King, an honorary doctor of this university, who referred in a speech on 4 April 1967, exactly one year before his death, to 'the Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them'.²⁹ For two centuries or more, European thinkers have developed a view of the world that purports to be universal but that is in fact based on an idealized reading mostly of their own history. I suggest that it is precisely this arrogance of feeling that we will have to renounce as a consequence of the resurgence of Asian powers in particular, and that if we do this, we will come to see Africa too in a new light.

If we Europeans are to understand the world now emerging, it is in our own interest to accept that not all of the ideas that we have distilled from a reading of our own history are signboards to be passed by all mankind on its journey into the future. We will have to judge the histories of countries outside Europe partly by criteria derived from their own readings of their past. Further, we may even have to review aspects of our own history in that light. We will then be able to interpret Africa's current problems in terms other than as a botched decolonization or a liberation that is always incomplete. In the case of South Africa, we will be able to conceive of its current state and future prospects in ways that are not determined by a failure to be like us. Exactly what these new ways will be no one presently knows. They will emerge from how South Africans interpret their own history.

²⁹ Martin Luther King, 'Beyond Vietnam: a time to break silence', published at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html> [accessed 18 June 2009].

This is not a call for us to abandon our most cherished ideals in a spirit of despair, for example in regard to human rights and basic liberties, but rather to reinvigorate them by paying far more attention to data drawn from outside Europe than we have done, and by respecting the authority of thinkers formed in other traditions. Increasingly, we will have to appreciate the ways in which others see the world, not only for purposes of comparison and insight, but simply to understand how the world has become what it is. We should cease believing almost instinctively that ideas emanating from Africa must be wrong, since our underlying assumption is that they are destined to be replaced with ideas made in Europe. This will break the habit of decades, even centuries.

We Europeans, too, have to decolonize our minds.

Mijnheer de Rector, ladies and gentlemen, this seems an appropriate point at which to close. But before doing so, I must recognize and thank at least some of those who have made this occasion possible, including Archbishop Tutu himself and the College van Bestuur of this university. I would also like to thank the Faculty of Social Sciences and especially the dean of the faculty, Professor Bert Klandermans, who has made me feel so welcome in my new job. So too have my colleagues in the Culture, Organization and Management group headed by Professor Marcel Veenswijk. However my most immediate colleagues, and those with whom I am in the closest contact since we all share the same office, are the staff of the Southern Africa-VU-Strategic Alliances office, SAVUSA, headed by Dr Harry Wels. Included in this category of closest colleagues are my fellow Tutu professors Eddy Van der Borcht, Chris Elbers and Geert Savelsbergh. I would also like to thank Professor Leo de Haan, director of the Afrika-Studiecentrum in Leiden, for allowing me to share my time between that institution and this one. Last but not least, I would like to thank my life partner, Gerrie ter Haar, herself a professor, from whom I have learned so much.

Thank you all.